

Exchange Program LLB International and European Law National Law School of India University, India

For the exchange program in the LLB International and European Law, I was the first student from the University of Groningen to study at the National Law School of India University in Bangalore, the best law school in the country. I left to India at the beginning of October, and stayed in Delhi for a month before travelling to Bangalore, in the state of Karnataka, two-and-a-half-hour flight away. Upon my arrival at the University, I fell in love with the campus and its tropical atmosphere. I was supposed to share a room with another exchange student, but he found an empty room that he could move into, and so he did. I was thus one of the very few people in campus that had a room to himself. The campus houses approximately 500 students (the entirety of the student body, with a handful of exceptions).

The University offers one five-year combined LLB/BA degree, and three Masters programs: Human Rights Law, Business Law and a Masters in Public Policy, which is only two years old. The exchange students are placed in the hostel named Hoogly, which houses the Masters students. The rooms in this hostel, one could say, are nicer and less cramped, as in the other two hostels three people share a room, each living in one 'cuby' (cubicle), which is most of the time delineated by a curtain. The campus has everything one needs, including a bistro/restaurant, a snack store, a canteen, a gym; a football field; basketball, tennis and volleyball courts, and the best law library in all of India. Besides the local 'law-schoolites', as they refer to themselves and each other, you will find in the campus about thirty resident dogs (which are cared for by the Society for Non-Human Persons), peacocks, snakes, and a monkey if you are lucky.

The Application

The application procedure was not necessarily hard or tedious, but I did encounter some problems. I communicated mainly with the Secretary of the Vice Chancellor, and at times it took her weeks to answer my emails. In a couple of occasions, I found myself spamming the same email three or four times a week. Most of the questions I asked were never answered and I had to rely on the information provided in the website. Doing that is, in my opinion, not a good idea, which is something I will come back to. If I could go back in time, I would probably change my strategy to spamming them with calls, as opposed to emails. The few times that I spoke to Mrs Usha, which is responsible for communication with exchange students, she mainly told me to go to her office once I was in Bangalore. In short, most administrative matters are essentially dealt with in person, and I was not able to do so until I arrived in the University, about four days before the start of the program. Even then, I was greeted by a surprised 'you're early' from the Head of the Examination Department. However, she was very helpful and had a constant smile on her face as she answered my questions with the idiosyncratic Indian head-shake in a colorful saree. I learned later that students at NLS are rarely allowed to venture into the Examination Department, which made me more selective about the times I bothered them with paperwork or other matters.

As regards the VISA application, it should be noted that all paperwork is processed by a private entity, VFS, which takes care of submissions for the Embassies. Most employees are, however, not Indian, and rarely seemed to be familiar with the procedures themselves. I found myself in a Kafkaesque situation in this regard, since I was constantly asked for the certificate of incorporation, that is the registration of both universities. The employee of VFS that was handling my application refused to accept

it without these documents, despite my constant remarks, backed by information I got from RuG, from an immigration adviser from India and from the Groningen Registry, that as a public university, RuG did not need to have such a certificate as it was inherently recognized as an educational institution by the Dutch government. The same case applies to NLS; this should be emphasized strongly if any problem of this nature arises. The other formalities were easy, but not always clear on the website. For example, a document from the Gemeente stating the start of residence in Groningen is required, and costs approximately 15 euros, which is an additional expense to the 110-120 euros that the VISA costs by itself.

The Courses

The courses available to exchange students are exclusively from the LLB programme, that is, Masters courses are not offered for guests. On the website of NLS, it says that exchange students are free to choose among all the 60 courses offered throughout the five years of the LLB program. However, upon arrival, after having chosen my courses and received approval from the BoE, I found out that NLS 'strongly discourages' taking any course that is not from the 5th year, which consists of seminar courses. In this regard, the class experience for the exchange students is considerably better, but we were only provided with the courses once we arrived there, despite my repeated emails asking whether I could truly choose any course. The exam department was initially lenient, providing us with a one-week period to check all the courses, but later changes are not really welcome. As the first exchange student from RuG to go to NLS, I was what one could call an experiment. All the courses at NLS are worth 4 Indian credits. As the first student, I had to ask the Board of Examiners to come up with a conversion into ECTS. The conversion was 5 ECTS per course, which meant I needed to take up six courses. This was initially fine, but as the courses progressed the workload became immense. Furthermore, keeping up with the schedule was extremely hard. In fifth year courses, the professors are mainly guest lecturers, meaning that they are busy people with a lot of commitments outside of the university. This meant that a lot of classes got rescheduled. This did not seem to pose a problem for the students at NLS, since most of the fifth years were taking three courses, with some taking four and others taking two in one trimester. An additional problem was the way the timetable for the classes was decided. The communication between the professor and the class took place mainly through a class representative, who then forwarded the information to the whole class in a WhatsApp group. This meant that I had to manage six WhatsApp groups and had to filter to hundreds of messages every day in order to find out where and when classes would take place. This put a lot of strain on me, as all classes require a 75% of attendance. I talked to the exam department twice about this and complained about the class clashes, to which they answered that they had initially warned me about taking six courses.

The assessment for the courses followed a different format from the one we are used to. Seminar courses are assessed on the basis of a paper. Most courses also include a preliminary presentation where the paper is introduced to the class, a final presentation, in which the paper in itself is presented orally, usually with the help of a powerpoint presentation, and some courses also have other requirements, such as response papers or take-home exams.

As for the content of the courses, I got to study a wide range of interesting subjects that explored topics that I, as a European, was not familiar with. I took a course on Violence Against Women, an extremely fresh and relevant issue within the Indian society. I also studied Cyber Law, Media Law, Indian Electoral Laws and Health Care Law. The most interesting course I took up was Indian Criminal Justice Reform, which mainly delved into issues within Indian Criminal Procedure, including the huge problem

that India has with undertrial prisoners, the acceptability of a requirement to undergo a lie detector test, and many others. If I had to identify one problem with the content of the courses, it would be the fact that they mainly focus on Indian Law. It is important to note that the courses available to exchange students primarily target fifth year Indian Law students, which does cause problems regarding background knowledge, especially as a third law International and European Law student. However, teachers are lenient when it comes to writing the paper on international law, and tend to encourage exchange students to write their papers from a comparative perspective. Most teachers showed eagerness for exchange students to share their own perspectives in class and actively endeavored to get the exchange students into the debate. Participation in most classes is essentially inevitable, since some courses have less than 10 students.

The Experience

Overall, my experience at NLS was invaluable. Not only did I learn about a hybrid system of law, which draws mainly on common law but has several civil law elements, but I got to share knowledge and experiences with the brightest legal minds in India. I found myself sitting in a room with future Supreme Court Judges and high-ranking civil servants. In my opinion, it was that exchange of knowledge that I benefitted from the most. The level of political consciousness and ideological diversity was outstanding, and I would rarely spend a day without engaging in one sort of debate or another. While I was, at the outset, cautious as to certain points and issues that I considered sensitive, I later learnt that there was little, if not nothing, that the students at NLS were not ready to engage in a discussion about, and their points were always thought-provoking. I also built friendships that I am sure will last for a long time.

One should note, however, when going to NLS, that the environment they will spend most of the time in is not one that reflects the reality of Indian society. In fact, it is very far from it. As students in Groningen, we perceive students as an integral and fundamental part of the community. The student community at NLS is an isolated one, and even as an exchange student one cannot but feel that they are in a sort of bubble. The university is, on top of that, at the outskirts of the city. In a way, this might be perceived as a good thing, as the bustle and constant rush that reigns in Indian cities might be hard to handle at times.

Now, about India. Anyone with basic knowledge of geography knows that India is an enormous country, and is referred to as a subcontinent. This does not only provide for a unique diversity of landscape and climate, but also for a variety of culture and language that, one could say, is comparable to that of the European Union. Obviously, this would still be an overstatement in my opinion, but that remains arguable, and I had many a debate with several students at NLS that defended that even the European Union's diversity was not at the same level as that of India. This diversity is, very fortunately, notable within the university itself, as students come from all parts of the country. It is thus really interesting to observe the different points of view that spring from the different cultural, social and even legal traditions of the students. Some students, for example, did not speak Hindi, but regional languages, and thus only spoke in English with their fellow students.

Practical Matters

As is imaginable in a country so different, with circumstances so alien to those we are used to in Europe, there are a few practical matters that have to be paid attention to.

Firstly, the assumption that, English being an official language, people will speak English, is false. While the English level at the university was outstanding, that among the average population was seemingly non-existent. In fact, Bangalore being in the South of India, most locals did not even speak Hindi, which made it impossible even for students at NLS to communicate with the locals in the same language. Communication is thus hard at the beginning, but there should be no problem to get on with one's everyday life and simple transactions.

Secondly, administrative matters of any kind tend to be slow and convoluted. Matters like opening a bank account require a long struggle against a bureaucratic system that is at times infuriatingly rigid and, at other times, astoundingly vague and unclear. In this regard, all I can advise is sterling patience and a healthy sense of humor. Looking for a pragmatic sense in it might drive one into madness, and speaking of madness, next topic is money and leisure.

My main problem regarding finances was that my ING card from Groningen did not work at any ATM, and I do not have a VISA card. I chose not to obtain an Indian bank card because my parents live in New Delhi and thus I had a way to get money. If you have a VISA, you will be fine (all other exchange students used their cards from home). I also had the privilege to witness a revolutionary economic change, implemented by the Government, known as demonetization, a phenomenon I encourage to search on Google, for it's as fascinating as it was surreal at the time.

When compared to the Netherlands, or any other European country, for that matter, India is incredibly cheap. However, Bangalore has plenty of 'hip' restaurants, bars and clubs where the prices are similar to ours (See Church Street and Kormangala). Most of these places try quite hard to imitate our conception of a 'cool' place. Local bars are also quite ubiquitous in the city - which could be considered a rarity -, but they come with more restrictions, some of them of utmost importance. I would not deem it advisable to attend local establishments where alcohol is served without the company of local students. Furthermore, and this one is more prohibitive in nature, no girls (local or not). It is plainly not safe, for either party involved. It is important to note that 'partying' will be expensive, albeit in relative terms. It is thus more sensible to take advantage of the truly cheap activities available. India has an incredible landscape and cultural tradition, and travelling is bafflingly affordable. It will likely involve taking day-long rides on trains and buses, but I believe that is one of the key factors of the experience. Some of the trains and busses provide food and tea/coffee throughout the journey, as well as a place to sleep within your compartment. Popular sea-side destinations include Goa and Gokarna, among others, while other usual recommendations from NLS students include Hampi and Kasol.

Overall

Overall, my experience in India was invaluable. I met some of the most intelligent I've ever come across. Despite the workload of six courses and the lack of free time, I tried to make the best out of it. I learnt about India and the mind-bogglingly complex society that it is. I learnt about not taking things for granted and, most importantly, that what we consider one country with one identity might turn out to be a world, no, a universe of its own. The sheer amount of knowledge and information that I got from a friendly evening conversation was enough to keep me in reflection mode for hours. All I can say is that I envy whomever gets a chance to go there, for I'd definitely go again!